

## Dialogue

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*Regulating the Forest Industry in Papua New Guinea:  
An Interview with Brian D Brunton*

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*Solomon Island Nongovernment Organizations:  
Major Environmental Actors*

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The immediate challenge faced by both the Solomon Islands Government and nongovernment organizations working in development and environmental matters is how to equitably deliver pertinent insights, information, and services to almost 400,000 people living in 5500 widely dispersed villages, many of which are in the highlands and interior lowlands, with forbidding terrains and accessible only by footpaths. More than 50 percent of the country's scattered villages have fewer than 60 inhabitants.

The modern means of spreading information, understanding, and awareness—television, radio, print media—are effectively denied the bulk of the nation, the village dwellers outside the main towns. How then can vital, necessary, and pertinent environmental, political, cultural, and development information, awareness building, and understanding be shared in a continuous, consistent, and constant manner with a scattered population?

Since 1982, the Solomon Islands Development Trust (SIDT) has, through its field staff, media section, theater groups, and departments for alternative forest harvesting techniques, worked to combat forest destruction and to pioneer sustainable forestry development. The Pavuvu logging issue of 1995 became the focus of its development and environmental efforts.

THE SIDT STORY

In early 1982, having worked in many Solomon Island districts since 1958, I inaugurated the Solomon Islands Development Trust with funding from an American nongovernment organization, the Foundation for the Peoples of the South Pacific. The development philosophy and outreach pattern of the new organization were largely drawn from my doc-

toral research for the University of Hawai'i conducted in Are'are, Malaita, in 1980. The dissertation called for the newly formed institution to embark on a comprehensive training program for its field staff and recruited personnel. A board of trustees made up of Solomon Islanders drawn from local institutions such as the Teachers Union, the National Provident Fund, and the National Council of Women, directed the organization to be initially involved in development education, awareness building, and villager training. Project funding and implementation were not priority issues.

From the very beginning, the Solomon Islands Development Trust questioned prevailing development wisdom. Its very first public document, *A Statement of Resolve*, dated September 1982, clarified how it would work in development, which was understood as primarily a political, cultural, and educational process and only secondarily as an economic issue (SIDT 1982). The trust did not see itself as an agent of change simply by pushing self-help, grassroots, community projects. It made little sense to the Solomon Islands Development Trust to fund poultry projects, for instance, when villagers' very life sources—forests, streams, rivers, and reefs—were being destroyed by commercial logging and destructive fishing practices. But the theoretical underpinnings of the organization would mean little to island resource owners unless that message were carried to the backbone of the Solomons, the villagers. This development message was delivered continually, consistently, and constantly through the use of village-based mobile teams.

The Solomon Islands Development Trust's working methodology of more than two hundred fifty trained village workers, conducting workshops in local languages in a continuous pattern, equipped the organization with hundreds of grassroot "eyes, ears, and hands" capable of reaching out and informing rural people.

The trust operates in each of the nation's ten provinces, including Honiara, with a minimum of four or five teams consisting of three or four people in each province. Provinces with larger populations, such as Malaita, Guadalcanal, and Western, have two or more SIDT centers with double the number of team members. These fifty mobile teams, as they are called, have over the past ten years conducted more than 4500 village workshops reaching out to more than 250,000 people (SIDT 1982–1994).

In its first three years of outreach programs—1984–1986—the organ-

ization focused on a campaign for Rural Water Supply and Sanitation, preparing villagers to become more responsive to owning, caring for, and repairing government-installed water supplies. In each of the following campaigns, Disaster Awareness and Preparation (1986–1988), Population Education and Resource Management Understanding (1989–1991), and Malaria as a Preparation against AIDS (1992–1995), the basic outreach formula stayed constant. Village leaders gave permission for the mobile team to conduct the workshop, and a team of four trained personnel from the area would conduct it, usually in local language. Using “Open Learning Tools” such as the “Village Quality of Life Index,” the team gleaned from the villagers an information base that was then used in the workshops.

The impact of fifty to sixty mobile teams conducting village workshops on a monthly basis over a ten-year period made the SIDT development message more accessible to rural people than anything that had happened in the past. Although commercial logging is currently a “hot button” topic in Solomons, the Solomon Islands Development Trust’s mobile team workshops, together with its publications such as *Link*, *Komiks* (Pijin-English comics) and its theater team, were already making inroads into village people’s consciousness during the early 1980s.

It became obvious, although slowly, that merely informing resource owners that the logging companies were ripping them off was not sufficient. Theater, print media, and the face-to-face sharing of information were absolutely necessary but totally insufficient to cause something practical to be done about sustainable forestry. Alternative ways of harvesting forest wealth had to be tried, perfected, and presented to landowning groups. Out of this need the newest departments of the organization were created: Conservation in Development (1991), which perfected *ngali* nut oil production, fiber paper making, and ecotourism; and the Ecoforest Unit (1994), which focused on training landowners to cut, mill, and sell their own trees.

Public criticism of how Solomon Islands natural resources were being traded off with little benefit to the nation’s resource owners did not go over well among some government decision makers and the logging industry. Violence, the killing of Mr Sony Tong, brought things to a head. The managing director of Kyuken Timbers, Mr Koo, an overseas Chinese, was arrested and imprisoned to await trial for his part in the murder, but unfortunately, the plane that was carrying the only witness to the crime to

Honiara for his court appearance hit a mountain during bad weather in southern Guadalcanal in September 1991. All fifteen passengers died instantly. Mr Tong's murderer, who had previously been convicted of the murder and transferred to another island for his own safety, was among them. Exactly who had paid the "hit man" to commit the crime has never been established in a court of law.

### SPLITTING THE NATION

Commercial logging, like no other issue, has split the young nation. Since 1978 no other single activity has caused so much hurt and distrust and produced a growing gap of suspicion among families and clan lines and between provinces and the central government.

The Central Bank of Solomon Islands annual report for 1994 made it clear that the Solomons was in the midst of a logging boom: "For the third consecutive year, the rate of forest extraction continued unabated, responding to the very high log prices experienced especially in mid-1994." Only recently, in 1993, had forestry become the largest foreign exchange earner. "Timber exports have jumped from S\$110 million (36 percent of total merchandise exports) in 1992 to S\$230 million (55 percent of total merchandise exports) in 1993" (World Bank 1995).

Fortunately, during the same period, late 1980s and early 1990s, the community of nongovernment organizations involved with environmental issues gained ground as well. The Development Services Exchange (DSE), the local umbrella organization, grew slowly during the 1980s from a handful of concerned groups to more than fifty dues-paying organizations. Although a majority of these focused on social issues (for example, the disabled, youth, women's issues, and rural training), a few became vocal about the environment. Soltrust began its operations in the Solomons in 1986, Greenpeace in 1991, and the Nature Conservancy in 1992. It became evident to the NGO community as well as concerned citizens that the government, with its great need of revenue, as well as the logging industry's need of hardwood trees, had different priorities from resource owners when it came to the sustainable harvesting of the nation's rain-forest wealth.

Logging companies were positioning themselves to cash in on the world's ever-expanding hardwood market, coinciding neatly with the "unsustainable increase in government domestic borrowing." Actual pro-

duction levels of harvested timber are estimated to be three times greater than the sustainable level of 250,000 cubic meters a year. Even the Solomon Islands Forest Industries Association argued that there should be a gradual increase in the duty on logs, above a certain benchmark price, to achieve a sustainable level of harvesting (CBSI 1995). The government's blessing on the commercial log feeding frenzy, the growth and activity of environmentally concerned nongovernment organizations, and citizens' attention to sustainable development trends came to a head with the Pavuvu Island controversy in the middle of 1995.

### THE PAVUVU ISLAND CONTROVERSY

The Pavuvu Island case study shows how nongovernment organizations, local people, and government officials interacted over an issue of national importance. It became, also, an example of how nongovernment organizations are increasingly assuming public leadership roles, once thought to be exclusively those of elected officials. The Pavuvu issue is as much about information sharing, democratic ideals, and authority as it is about foreign logging companies. It is about the rights of citizens to use all legal methods to voice their understandings, concerns, and interests.

The British colonial government leased Pavuvu Island to Levers Pacific Plantations in 1905 in exchange for a few bottles, some tins, and a handful of beads. The island, however, is a valuable piece of real estate—approximately 6287 hectares of commercial forest with a total harvestable volume of 895,268 cubic meters of log resources. Experts believe that the Pavuvu forest is worth US\$120 million (Billy 1995). Pavuvu's original owners, the Lavukal people of the Russell Islands, have over many years pleaded with past governor-generals, prime ministers, government officials, and their own members of parliament for the return of the island to its rightful owners. All to no avail (Rose 1995).

On 10 March 1995, the newly elected executive of Central Province (constituted on 8 March) hastily granted Marving Brothers a business license that allowed the central government to issue a logging permit for Pavuvu Island. The government promised the Lavukal people development, including clinics, schools, roads, and a large agricultural project, once the logging operations were completed. However, many Lavukal people held serious reservations about allowing their land to be logged. These villagers, although having their homes on the small islands off the

Pavuvu coast, used the larger island as their supermarket, pharmacy, storehouse, and food producer, and especially as a source of fresh water. Commercial logging, they knew, would deprive them of these life sources and no amount of money or development would make up for the loss. Landowners sent a letter to the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Conservation threatening to burn down any logging equipment arriving there (*Link* 36, 1995). Some men did indeed torch three bulldozers on 3 July.

On 12 April the government became worried about the public's reactions to its plans and sent a four-man delegation led by Forest Minister Allan Kemakeza to present once again the government's decisions for the area. On the same ship that brought the government party over from the capital, Honiara, a police field force was sent to provide security for both the government officers and the Marving Brothers' heavy-duty logging equipment.

During the first part of May, the Solomon Islands Development Trust conducted a survey of Pavuvu wherein more than 650 people—mostly from the town area but a good number of village people as well—responded to a series of eight questions. More than 90 percent of the people polled disagreed with the statement: "Government has the first say over development on Pavuvu Island." Almost 84 percent were convinced that Pavuvu Islanders themselves had the first say over development plans on the island (SIDT 1995). Survey results were presented in Honiara on 18 May at a public meeting attended by 150 people. The survey results were shared with government officials as well. At approximately the same time, 14–17 May, the Development Services Exchange sent its own fact-finding delegation—including some of its own members and members of Greenpeace and the Save the Children Foundation—to meet "with Landowners and to get first hand information on the Pavuvu issue" (Billy 1995). Its report was made public by 20 May.

A Parliamentary Opposition Mission traveled by ship to Pavuvu on the same date as the NGO mission, 14 May. It was led by the Honourable Joses Tuhanuku, the opposition spokesman on Forestry, Environment and Conservation, the Honourable Hilda Kari, an opposition member of parliament, and Mr Patterson Oti, the secretary to the leader of the opposition. On 24 May the mission tabled its report, which recommended that "Logging on Pavuvu by Marving Bros. should be immedi-

ately terminated [and that the] Government . . . immediately transfer all portions of alienated land on Pavuvu to Lavukal Resources Development Company" (Tuhanuku 1995).

Prime Minister Mamaloni's response to what he took as a public rebuke to his authority was swift. On 22 May he issued a written public warning singling out the NGO community at large and its expatriate advisers in particular "not to interfere in internal government development matters of Solomon Islands and to refrain from feeding the media with false information." He also claimed, without offering a shred of evidence, that "These NGO personals (*sic*) are the same characters who have destabilised Papua New Guinea during the past ten years and have now come here to do the same to our people and country" (Mamaloni 1995).

The NGO response to the prime minister's statement was swift and to the point. The day after the prime minister's national security decree, on 23 May, the Development Services Exchange faxed its public response to the Office of the Prime Minister as well as to the media. The statement said the Development Services Exchange was happy to hear that the government had been lenient with nongovernment organizations over the years. It applauded this leniency for it was a sure sign of democracy at work. However, the Development Services Exchange was appalled at the accusations made by the Office of the Prime Minister. It saw "this accusation as unfounded and ask[ed] the officer responsible to substantiate the facts of the accusation or apologise to the wrongly accused NGO community" (DSE 1995).

Of course the NGO community did not expect a reply, and they were not disappointed. The government offered neither apology, retraction, nor proof of the accusations made. The Honourable Ezekiel Alebua, parliamentarian and member of the opposition, was saddened by the prime minister's threatening attitude toward nongovernment organizations and their expatriate workers. The prime minister's statement was given, he said, "to protect the interests of foreign logging companies and not [those of] Solomon Islanders" (*Link* 36, 1995).

"On 28 May the Government made a Secret Mission to the Russell Islands to carry out a referendum on the Pavuvu Issue" as stated in its own document (SIG 1995). The Honourable Sir Baddeley Devesi, leader of the opposition in parliament, decried the government's "secret mission" to Pavuvu wherein nine people, two of whom were ministers, "conducted a pseudo-referendum" (Devesi 1995). As Devesi pointed out, only



three villages filled out the mission's forms, while six villages "refused to respond to the form" (Devesi 1995).

Augustine Rose, a Pavuvu landowner and lawyer, asked police permission for a public march to parliament, which was refused. However, a peaceful demonstration was allowed, and on 22 June more than three hundred Russell Island supporters, mostly from the NGO sector, presented their petition to the deputy prime minister at Parliament House (the prime minister was said to be sick at the time).

On the last day of June, the government tabled its Pavuvu report: *Pavuvu Development Profile: A Model for Integrated Agro-Forestry and Land Settlement Scheme* in parliament (SIG 1995). Although the document is more than eighty pages long, it focuses on only one way to harvest the nation's forests: the exporting of round logs. The document is written with a pro-logging stance, defending the government's actions because of its great need for revenue. There is no copy of the actual questions asked of the Russell Island people. It is not clear whether the survey was focusing on a resettlement scheme, on logging, or on the government's development promises.

Responses to the report from parliament's opposition members, the NGO community, and Russell Islanders themselves were uniformly negative: the survey was poorly conceived, unprofessionally conducted, and biased in its reporting. The Honourable Joses Tuhakuku, spokesman for the opposition, called it "a joke" while speaking on it in parliament (*Link* 36, 1995).

### PAVUVU ISLAND, GOING BEYOND LOGGING

The Pavuvu Island issue has gone beyond a simple case of foreign logging interests felling and exporting round logs against the expressed wishes of the majority of the landowners. It has become a case of the government growing deaf to the voice of its people, and a citizenry determined to have its say.

When sections of society, in this case nongovernment organizations, raised their voice in opposition, the prime minister used intimidation to silence them. The government pressured and threatened the legitimate questioning of its citizens. The NGO reaction to this intimidation was to respond with courtesy, but forcefully, that it would not be cowed by the use of unsubstantiated accusations and the use of intimidation tactics.

It has become clear that the NGO sector needed to use its own information-sharing methods. The Solomon Islands Development Trust's use of *Link* magazine, its ability to reach out and test public opinion (eg, through the Pavuvu Survey), and especially its mobilization tactic of using dozens of workers to share the other side of the story with villagers is vital for the health of Solomons democracy. The government's reaction in the face of the nongovernment organizations' spirited defense of rights has been one of total silence.

In July 1995, Solomon Islands celebrated its seventeenth anniversary of independence, but in the Pavuvu Island issue its top decision makers reverted to an old colonial pressure tactic of fear and intimidation. However, Solomon Island citizens refused to buckle or back down. Although Marving Brothers continues to export round logs, it and the government's decision makers have become much more aware of the NGO involvement. The company now seeks to extend its logging on customary land, but the NGO community, as well as other concerned citizens, is closely monitoring the situation. Marving Brothers won the first Pavuvu battle. However, the war continues. The NGO community will continue the fight for what it sees as not only a destructive development practice but a case of a government growing increasingly deaf to the legitimate voice of its people.

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*Abstract*

The scattered nature of Solomon Island villages, the people's low literacy rate, and the country's many languages make it difficult to share development and environment messages effectively. Solomon Islands Development Trust has had a fourteen-year track record of reaching out to the village sector through its fifty mobile teams as well as its media arm, theater team, and departments focusing on sustainable forestry practices. It has become a major actor in combating destructive logging practices. The Pavuvu controversy focused national attention on the destructive practices of an overseas logging company, the government's dire need to gain revenue through logging, and the public stance of nongovernment organizations against the logging companies and the government. The Pavuvu controversy clarified for many that the logging issue was not simply about logging versus not logging, but more about the kind of government the country was experiencing.

KEYWORDS: logging, nongovernment organizations, Pavuvu Island, resource owners, Solomon Islands Development Trust.